Sunday, June 7, 1998
WHEN TO SPEAK, WHEN TO KEEP SILENT
John 16:12-15

An ancient folk tale tells of a little boy who was always saying unkind things about other people. One day his father had him take a bag of goose feathers and fling them out of a second-story window. The wind swirled them into the streets and alleys. Then the father said to his son, “That is the way your words go out into the world. Now go out and pick up all the goose feathers.” The boy said, “That’s impossible.” “So it is,” said his father. “In the same way, it is impossible to take back the words you have spoken.”

When to speak, what to say when speaking, when to stop talking, and when to keep silent — these are difficult lessons to learn. The Bible gives good directions on this subject. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are told: “There is a time to speak and a time to be silent.” In one of his teachings, Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment, you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter.” And in today’s story from the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

We all remember the childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Deep down we know this is not true. The wrong kind of words can and do hurt us very much, and the right kind of words can be healing. The wrong words can sting us or destroy a relationship. The right words spoken at the right time can help build a relationship. Some of the most healing words in every language are: “I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” And then the response, “I forgive you.” In the book of Proverbs, we are told, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11).

Jesus knew when to speak and when to keep silent. According to the story in the Gospel of John, one day when Jesus was having one of his last conversations with his closest followers and giving them a whole series of instructions and promises, he said, “I still have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

He knew when he had said enough. He knew when to end the sermon, when to conclude the speech, when to stop teaching because his followers had all they could understand.

In another incident recorded in the Gospel of John, a woman was brought to Jesus by the Scribes and Pharisees because she had been caught in adultery. They wanted to test Jesus, so they asked him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now, in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?”

Jesus did not reply immediately. The story says that he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Then, after what must have seemed like a long period of silence, and after they had asked him again what he thought should be done, he finally stood up, looked them straight in the eye, and said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once more, he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Silence. But when they heard what he had to say — they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Only then did he speak again. He spoke gently to her and asked, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” Then he said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and do not sin again.”

Think of the many things he could've said to her and didn't. He knew she did not need more accusations and condemnation. She had had all that she could bear, so all he said was, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." What did Jesus mean when he said that his disciples could not bear some of what he had to say if he said it now? He knew they were not ready to hear some things because their minds and hearts had not yet had the proper preparation, the necessary experience.

Here's a question for you: Would you want to know now, if it were possible to know, all the things that are going to happen to you in the future — the good and the bad — until the day you die? Would you be able to bear it, to handle it, if you could know? Would you want to know years in advance the exact date of your death?

Within the legend of King David, there is a parable concerning his desire to know about himself. After learning everything that was within his power, David asked God to reveal to him the date of his death so that he could plan his life accordingly. God answered that no one can know the time of his death. It was better for David to live with an acute awareness of his own mortality without knowing the exact date and, in this way, more wisely fulfill his life.

There are two points to this little story about King David. The first point is that we can never know all of life's mysteries. And the second point is that maybe God did not inform David because God did not know; perhaps the date and circumstances of David's end were not exactly determined.

According to our Christian faith, the hope that sustains us comes from the belief that our future is yet to be created and is created in part by us.

However, in this little story from the Gospel of John, Jesus also knew that words spoken at the wrong time, before people are ready for them, are misunderstood or, worse still, can place a heavy burden on people which they are not capable of carrying at that time.

There are times in the lives of each one of us when, if we speak words too soon, we can do more harm than good. We can hurt rather than heal. Waiting for the right time to speak is the same as waiting for the teachable moment.

An inexperienced teacher, for example, might overwhelm you with an avalanche of facts or information which you cannot yet assimilate because there has been no preparation, no groundwork or foundation. You have no context in which to place the information.

Suppose you want to major in mathematics in college. You would not be able to understand the most advanced math courses until you had mastered the prerequisites. The same is true for philosophy or any other course of study. When children are very young, there are many things they are not able to do or understand until they are developmentally ready.

I've often said to people who come to be married, "I could tell you many things about marriage, but you are not ready to bear them now. After you've been married two or three years, then you'll be ready to hear them, and it will make some sense."

The followers of Jesus were not yet mature enough in their faith to be able to understand all that Jesus had to tell them. Because he was an excellent teacher, he patiently moderated his

pace to theirs. He led them forward step by step as they were able to understand and follow. It reminds me of what a wise person said to me about leadership years ago: “If, as a leader, you get too far out front, your followers will think you are the enemy and shoot you.”

Another wise saying is this: “When the pupil is ready, a teacher appears.”

One of the most remarkable books I’ve read recently, which illustrates this point, has the title Tuesdays with Morrie. The subtitle is, An Old Man, A Young Man, and Life’s Greatest Lesson. It’s a short book. I strongly recommend that you get the book and read it as soon as possible.

The book is written by Mitch Albom, who writes for the Detroit Free Press. Mitch was a student of Morrie Schwartz, a professor of sociology at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. He graduated in 1979. During his years at Brandeis, Mitch was not only a student but a close friend of his beloved professor. Following graduation, Mitch promised to keep in touch but didn’t. He was busy pursuing his own career.

A few years after graduation, Mitch had his first serious encounter with death. His favorite uncle died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 44. After the funeral, his life changed. He felt as if time were suddenly precious, and he buried himself in accomplishments because, with accomplishments, he believed he could control things. He wanted to squeeze in every last piece of happiness before he got sick and died like his uncle. He thought of Morrie now and then, the things he had taught him about “being human” and “relating to others,” but it was always in the distance, as if from another life.

And then, one night, Mitch was flicking through the TV channels, and something caught his attention. It was Morrie Schwartz being interviewed by Ted Koppel on Nightline, and he was talking about his terminal illness and about living life while facing death.

In 1994, Morrie Schwartz was diagnosed with “Lou Gehrig’s disease,” or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). As yet, there is no known cure. Morrie was in his seventies. Mitch knew he had to get in touch with his old professor. He made an appointment to visit Morrie in his home, and from then on, every week he flew from Detroit to West Newton, Mass., to visit. And that’s what the book is about — these Tuesday mornings with Morrie until he died.

It’s a book about life’s most important lessons. It’s also a book about what Mitch was now ready to learn about life and death, things he was not ready to learn earlier. Their rekindled relationship turned into one final class: “lessons in how to live.”

Here’s how Mitch describes it: “The last class of my old professor’s life took place once a week in his house.... The subject was the Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience. No grades were given, but there were oral exams each week. You were expected to respond to questions, and you were expected to pose questions of your own. You were also required to perform physical tasks now and then, such as lifting the professor’s head to a comfortable spot on the pillow or placing his glasses on the bridge of his nose. Kissing him good-bye earned you extra credit.

No books were required, yet many topics were covered, including love, work, community, family, aging, forgiveness, and finally, death. The last lecture was brief, only a few words. A funeral was held in lieu of graduation.”

Morrie was wise enough to know that the things he was able to teach his student now, he would not have been able to teach him earlier. Mitch would not have been able to comprehend what was being said. The professor would have been answering questions that Mitch was not asking.

The Christian life is something like that. It is frequently a gradual growth and training, a wading deeper and deeper into truth. We do not get a complete and final revelation all at once or know all the truth about God at any one time. There will always be mystery. To walk with God means that every turn on the way opens up new views and vistas, and we assimilate them as we grow and mature. God's revelation is continuous. There is always more truth to be discovered.

"I have yet more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." These words of Jesus are instructive, not only in reminding us that learning about God and God's truth, and learning about life itself, is a lifelong process, but also as good advice to us in our day-to-day relationships with each other. They are especially important for us to remember as parents and grandparents. These words are also good advice to preachers and speakers.

"I have yet many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." There's only one word left for me to say in this sermon. Amen.